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The effect of linguistic abstraction on interpersonal distance

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Abstract

It is well known that people describe positive behaviors of others close to them (e.g., in-group member, friend) in abstract terms, but with concrete terms in the case of people who they are not close to (e.g., out-group member, enemy). In contrast, negative behaviors of people who we are close to are described in concrete terms, but in abstract terms for people who are distant. However, the communicative impact of such subtle differences in language use on a receiver who is also the actor of the behavior being described has never been addressed. We hypothesized and found that a positive abstract message compared to a positive concrete message leads to perceived proximity to the sender, while a negative abstract message compared to a negative concrete message leads to perceived distance. The implications of this study, which is the first to show the communicative impact of biased language use, are discussed. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

We talk to many people on many different occasions. Often these fleeting encounters are functional, on occasions they are incidental. Not much is said in such encounters about how we feel towards each other, or what we think about the other, and yet we develop an intuitive sense of the nature of the relationship. It feels good or awkward, we feel close or distant, liked or disliked. It is oftentimes difficult, if not impossible, to explain why we arrive at the sensibilities that typify a relationship. One factor that may contribute to these intuitive inferences of proximity and distance may be how language is used to describe positive or negative events that we are engaged in. The study reported in this paper addresses the question of whether and how language use, and in particular the systematic difference in predicate use, contributes to feelings of proximity and distance.

Sometimes it is very obvious why we feel close or distant to another. For example, we feel distant when we are explicitly discriminated on the basis of our gender, race, or belief and feel close when somebody genuinely compliments us. However, there are also situations in which we experience feelings of proximity or distance, but are not necessarily able to articulate why. This can occur, for example, in the case of being subjected to subtle forms of prejudice. Although the direct expression of

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discrimination has become politically incorrect due to the prevalence of egalitarian social norms (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986), and is often negatively sanctioned, prejudice is still the order of the day. It has taken more sophisticated forms of expression and occurs in subtler and less detectable ways (Schnake & Ruscher, 1998). This type of prejudice may play a role in situations in which we experience feelings of proximity or distance, but cannot say why.

Subtle prejudice can be expressed in a number of ways (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995; Swim, Ferguson, & Hyers, 1999). One form of it is found in biased language use where people systematically vary the type of predicates they use as a function of whether they are describing positive and negative behaviors of in- or out-group members (Linguistic Intergroup Bias, LIB, Maass, Salvi, Arcuri, & Semin, 1989). Positive in-group and negative out-group behaviors are described with abstract predicates (e.g., 'X is helpful,' 'X is aggressive'). In contrast, the same positive behavior displayed by an out-group member and negative behavior displayed by an in-group member is predominantly described with concrete predicates (e.g., 'X helps,' 'X hurts'). This phenomenon not only operates in intergroup settings, but also at an interpersonal level (Maass, Milesi, Zabbini, & Stahlberg, 1995; Semin, Gil de Montes, & Valencia, 2003; Taris, 1999).

This systematic variation of linguistic abstraction occurs in a subtle and implicit way. The LIB correlates with implicit but not with explicit measures of prejudice (Von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, & Vargas, 1997). While people may be monitoring the explicit positivity or negativity of their utterances about a given group or person, a greater or lesser degree of abstraction appears to escape conscious access (Franco & Maass, 1996).

Moreover, it has been shown that these implicit biases in language use systematically influence the types of inferences made by recipients of such messages (Werkman, Wigboldus, & Semin, 1999; Wigboldus, Semin, & Spears, 2000). An abstract description has been shown to convey the impression that the behavior is due to enduring dispositions and not to some transitory state, while a concrete description suggests that the behavior is due to contextual or incidental features of the situation. In this way, biased language use contributes to the transmission and maintenance of existing stereotypes. Furthermore, people are able to make judgments about the sender's personal relationship with the actor on the basis of the abstraction level used by the sender to describe the actor's behavior (Douglas & Sutton, 2006).

These findings constitute an important step in examining how linguistically biased messages impact recipients of such messages. Notably, in all these recipient-based studies (Werkman et al., 1999; Wigboldus et al., 2000; Douglas & Sutton, 2006), the target whose behavior is being described and judged is different from the recipient. However, we not only receive descriptions of others, but we also receive feedback on our own behavior. Oftentimes, a party to a social event provides direct feedback on the behavior of an actor in that same situation. Surprisingly, the question of how a message varying systematically in abstraction level contributes to the regulation of the relationship between sender and receiver has never been examined. Although Douglas and Sutton demonstrated that observers are able to deduce the sender's personal relationship with the actor from the abstraction level, this research does not answer the question how does linguistic abstraction regulate the relationship between the sender and the receiver when this receiver is the person being described? We cannot simply extrapolate the findings of Douglas and Sutton and state that receivers respond in the same way as observers, since there might be differences between targets' and observers' reactions to the same messages.

To this end, we designed a study in which participants received a message containing feedback on a positive or negative behavior they had performed. This message varied in abstraction whereby the valence of the message was congruent with the behavior in question. Subsequently, the participant's judgment of their interpersonal distance to the sender of the message was measured. We measured both feeling close and behaving close to examine whether the subtle differences in the message only led to feelings of closeness or whether these subtle differences even influenced behavioral intentions towards

the sender. We hypothesized that participants receiving a positive abstract message upon a positive behavior would perceive being closer to the sender than those receiving a positive concrete message. Conversely, we hypothesized that participants who performed negative behavior and received a negative abstract message should perceive more interpersonal distance to the sender than participants receiving a negative concrete message. Additionally, we measured the perceived evaluation of the message to be able to separate the unique contributions of message abstraction and of evaluation to their interpersonal distance judgments.

METHOD

Participants and Design

One hundred one students from the Free University Amsterdam (63% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 20$ years) participated in this experiment on a voluntary basis. They received 5 Euro for their participation and were randomly assigned to one of the cells of a 2 (Abstraction: concrete vs. abstract) by 2 (Valence: positive vs. negative) between participants experimental design.

Procedure

Participants were seated in separate cubicles with a computer, a sheet of paper, and a pencil. Half of the participants were asked to describe an event in which they acted in a socially responsible way by standing up for somebody else's interests at the expense of their own (positive conditions). The other half was asked to describe an event in which they acted in a socially irresponsible way by advancing their own interests at the expense of the interests of another (negative conditions). The experimenter collected the description of the event after they had completed this.

Participants were subsequently informed that their description was given to another participant (sender) to form a first impression of them. They had not met the sender before and were not informed as to whether or not the sender was aware of the nature of the experimentally induced assignment they had received, namely to describe themselves in either a socially responsible or irresponsible way. After a few minutes, the event description was returned to them with a hand-written message on it that varied depending on experimental condition.

Message valence was always congruent with the valence of the described event. Message abstraction was manipulated by modifying one phrase in the message. In the *positive abstract* condition this read: 'In my view, you are someone who stands up for the interests of others. I think that you are socially very responsible.' In the *negative abstract* condition 'stands up for' was replaced by 'harms' and 'responsible' by 'irresponsible.' The *positive concrete* condition was formulated as follows: 'In my view, you acted in the interests of the other and stood up for the interests of the other.' In the *negative concrete* condition 'acted in' was replaced by 'harmed' and 'stood up' by 'did not stand up.'¹

To measure the perceived interpersonal distance, we used in the first place a slightly modified version of the Inclusion of Other in Self-scale (IOS scale, Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). This scale measures people's sense of interpersonal connectedness. It taps into both the feeling close and behaving

¹The original messages were formulated in Dutch. A literal translation of these messages to English without losing important but subtle details is impossible. Therefore, in the translated messages the abstract and concrete versions of the messages may appear to differ more than the Dutch messages.

close aspects. The scale we used consisted of seven pairs of circles of the same size that varied to the extent in which they were overlapping. Participants were asked to indicate which pair best represented their degree of similarity with the sender. Subsequently, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with a series of six statements that also measured participants' perceived relationship with the sender in terms of behavioral intentions and tendencies ('I would enjoy it to have a chat with the sender,' 'I am interested in the sender,' 'I think that the sender is somebody with whom I could easily get along,' 'I wouldn't like to meet the sender,' 'I would avoid the sender if I knew who the sender was,' and 'The sender's remark has done no good to what I think of the sender,' 1 = fully disagree, 7 = fully agree, the last three items were reverse coded). The IOS scale and the relationship items formed a reliable scale, Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$.

In addition, we measured the evaluation of the message by five items. We asked participants to indicate on a scale running from one (fully disagree) to seven (fully agree) whether they perceived the message as blunt, nice, humiliating, sympathetic, and complimentary. Negative items were reverse coded, Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$. Finally, the participants were debriefed, thanked, and paid.

RESULTS

We conducted an analysis of variance with Valence and Abstraction on the interpersonal distance scale. The predicted interaction between Valence and Abstraction was significant, $F(1, 97) = 20.29, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.17$. Simple main effects of Abstraction revealed that there was a significant difference in the positive, $F(1, 97) = 5.21, p < .03$, as in the negative conditions, $F(1, 97) = 16.63, p < .001$. As shown in Table 1, participants reported more proximity to the sender in the positive abstract than in the positive concrete condition. Similarly, participants reported less distance to the sender in the negative concrete than in the negative abstract condition. We also found a trivial main effect of Valence, $F(1, 97) = 18.77, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.25$. Participants reported more proximity in the positive ($M = 5.08$) than in the negative conditions ($M = 4.21$). A similar Valence main effect was obtained on the evaluation scale, $F(1, 97) = 260.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.73$. The message was evaluated more positively in the positive ($M = 5.95$) than in the negative conditions ($M = 3.13$). Neither the interpersonal distance nor the evaluation scale yielded a significant effect for Abstraction.

However, there was a significant Valence and Abstraction interaction for the evaluation scale, $F(1, 97) = 19.11, p < .02, \eta^2 = 0.17$. The message was evaluated more positively in the positive abstract

Table 1. Mean scores (standard deviations) on the interpersonal distance scale and on the evaluation scale as a function of abstraction and valence

	Abstraction	
	Abstract	Concrete
Interpersonal distance		
Positive	5.31 ^a (0.76)	4.83 ^b (0.66)
Negative	3.77 ^a (0.82)	4.65 ^b (0.78)
Evaluation		
Positive	6.25 ^a (0.70)	5.64 ^b (0.86)
Negative	2.67 ^a (1.00)	3.58 ^b (0.91)

Note: Means in rows with a different superscript, differ significantly from each other at the 0.05 level in tests for simple main effects.

($M = 6.25$) than in the positive concrete condition ($M = 5.64$) and more negatively in the negative abstract ($M = 2.67$) than in the negative concrete condition ($M = 3.58$). To test whether the evaluation mediated the interaction effect between Valence and Abstraction on the interpersonal distance to the sender, we used the procedure proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). The message was predictive of the evaluation scale, $\beta = .23$, $t(97) = 4.37$, $p < 0.001$. The interaction effect between Valence and Abstraction on the interpersonal distance scale, $\beta = .37$, $t(97) = 4.50$, $p < .001$, decreased significantly according the Sobel's test, $z = 2.97$, $p < .01$ (Sobel, 1982) when evaluation was added as predictor, but remained nevertheless significant, $\beta = .23$, $t(96) = 2.79$, $p < .01$. Thus, although the effect of the message on the interpersonal distance decreased when evaluation was added as a mediator, there was still a non-negligible significant direct effect of the message on the interpersonal distance. This suggests that while part of the effect can be explained in terms of evaluation, there remains a significant part that is due to message abstraction.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study show that receiving linguistically biased messages in an interpersonal communication setting influences the perceived interpersonal distance to the sender of the message: a receiver of a positive abstract message perceives more proximity to the sender than a receiver of a positive concrete message and a receiver of a negative abstract message perceives more distance to the sender than a receiver of a negative concrete message. Furthermore, our analyses suggest that the effect cannot be explained merely by how the message is evaluated. Although there was a decrease in the effect of the message on the perceived interpersonal distance when we used message evaluation as a mediator, there was still an important and significant part of the perceived interpersonal distance that was due to abstraction level of the message.

These findings indicate that it is not the particular evaluative properties of the message that leads to feelings of closeness or distance, but that there are other aspects of abstraction that lead to these feelings. Abstract messages imply different inferences than concrete messages. We assume that the hidden message of such communication is implicitly processed. While message valence is overtly assessable, it is nevertheless congruent with the behavior that is being commented upon. The type of predicate (verb vs. adjective) is very unlikely to be attended to or explicitly processed. This is a contention that is further reinforced by the fact that this study involved a between subjects design and participants were obviously unable to compare message types and the different predicates. Consequently, we presume that the type of inference that is made is implicit and leads to a 'feeling' of proximity or distance very much like the example of politically correct discrimination that leads to the strange feeling that one is being discriminated without knowing precisely why as we noted in the introduction to this paper.

Our stimulus material (i.e., the abstract and concrete messages) also differed in terms of grammatical tense. While the abstract messages were formulated in the present tense, the concrete messages were formulated in the past tense. The use of the present tense with trait terms (e.g., John is extroverted) implies possession of the property or quality. The use of the past tense however suggests that the person does not have the property any more (e.g., John was extroverted). In contrast, verbal descriptions of events are oftentimes after an event has been witnessed and therefore most frequently in the past tense. Obviously, there are exceptions to this (e.g., radio commentator on an ongoing soccer match). However, one might argue that presenting an event in the present tense implies continued possession, representing the same event in the past tense is a confound, since tense covaries with

abstract and concrete terms, respectively. This is an issue that the current research cannot resolve and that remains an open empirical question.

The main contribution of the current research is that it extends the voluminous work on the LIB into how systematic differences in language use contribute to the regulation of social relationships, by highlighting the contribution of a few simple words to the creation of feelings of proximity or distance. Previous research has shown that people systematically vary the abstraction level of their messages to describe a person's behavior as a function of whether the person is close (e.g., in-group member, friend) or distant to them (e.g., out-group member, enemy). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that participants who read messages about other's behaviors make systematic inferences as a function of the level of abstraction of the message. More recently, it has been shown that people are able to deduce the relation between a sender and the described person from the abstraction level of the description (Douglas & Sutton, 2006). What was lacking in the research on the LIB up to now was, in our view, how linguistically biased messages contribute to the regulation of interpersonal distance between a sender and a receiver. The research reported here highlights how strategic use of language can contribute to the regulation of interpersonal distance. Moreover, it takes the LIB from an individual level and introduces it to an interpersonal one.

This opens the research on the LIB to the broader domain of interpersonal relationships and how language and its strategic use may be involved in the subtle and strategic communication of distance and proximity. A question that comes into mind is how the presence or absence of prior relationships affects the effect of linguistically biased messages noted in this study. Since the LIB is a very subtle bias, the question is under which conditions such subtle biased language use influences interpersonal relationships. It is possible that the subtle linguistic differences in messages do not have any effect when the relationship between a sender and receiver is well established. Obviously, the current research cannot address this issue, but delineating the conditions under which systematic biases in language use shapes perceived distance and proximity inferences remains an interesting issue.

More importantly, the current research puts the issue of stereotyping into the 'public domain,' namely between people. It suggests that stereotyping and prejudice is a phenomenon that can be subtly driven by a few modifications to the words we choose to describe somebody else's behavior or performance. This then, in our view, gives rise to an indefinable feeling that something simply does not gel or alternatively that it feels good. The research we have reported here makes clear that on occasions friendships may hinge on just a few words.

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